

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on House Administration
October 16, 2007, 2:00 p.m.

My name is Joe Holland and I am the elected County Clerk, Recorder and Assessor for Santa Barbara County in California. As the County Clerk I am also the Registrar of Voters and it is my duty to run the Elections for the County.

I am also a member of the Board of Directors for the California Association of Clerks and Elections Officials (CACEO). As a member of this board I am also heading up a CACEO ad hoc Vote By Mail committee that is focused on identifying relevant issues and best practices for providing vote by mail / absentee balloting voter services for California voters.

Santa Barbara County currently has a total population of 421,000. The County has eight incorporated cities and 140,000 people living in rural and unincorporated areas.

There are currently 183,000 registered voters in the County. In 2002 Santa Barbara County was deemed to be a bilingual County and now provides all election material in Spanish and English.

California has had no-excuse absentee voting since 1978. With the advent of no excuse absentee voting Californians have increasingly chosen to vote by absentee ballot in each election. In the most recent November 2006 General Election over 40% of the votes cast in California were ballots cast through the mail.

Beginning in January 2002 new legislation took effect that allowed California voters to sign up to become permanent absentee voters. By registering with permanent absentee status, California voters are assured of being mailed an "absentee ballot" to their residence, 29 days before each and every election. This permanent absentee status remains in effect until the voter fails to cast a vote in two consecutive statewide elections.

Permanent absentee voting has proven to be very popular in California. For those counties that have chosen to promote this voting choice we are seeing as much as 50% of the registered voters signing up for permanent absentee status. In the 2006 November General Election 31 of California's 58 counties issued absentee ballots to more than 40% of their registered voters.

In Santa Barbara County 85,000 voters are signed up as permanent absentee voters. This represents 48% of the 183,000 registered voters in the County. In the November 2006 General Election, 55% of the ballots cast in Santa Barbara County were cast through the

mail. In the June 2006 Primary Election more than 60% of the ballots were cast through the mail.

Does the increase in absentee voting lead to higher turnout? Let's look at the statistics for Santa Barbara County. On average going back to 1998, and through 12 General, Primary and Special County-wide elections, we find that absentee voters return their ballots at a 74% rate. This compares to an average polling place turnout of 52% for the same period. So it makes sense that increasing the percentage of voters who vote absentee will lead to a higher overall level of voter participation.

There are a number of topics and issues relevant to absentee and mail ballot voting that each could warrant its own dissertation. Some of these topics include:

- The cost of absentee voting
- Security issues of absentee voting
- Transparency of absentee voting
- Mail ballot processing methodology
- Mail ballot processing existing and emerging technology
- Convenience of mail ballot voting versus traveling to the polls
- Necessity of continued voter services for disabled voters pursuant to HAVA
- Voter file maintenance

I have chosen in this brief presentation to focus solely on the benefits of increased voter turnout with respect to absentee voting. However, I am of course available to answer questions on any topic related to absentee voting.

In closing, in my opinion, providing no excuse absentee voting, is really about expanding voter choices, in choosing the method by which they exercise their right to participate in democracy. With thirty years of no excuse absentee voting history in California, evidence shows that voters are very appreciative of the option to vote from the privacy of their own home, and that the popularity of voting through the mail continues to increase.

Thank you